



dear reader, sincerely yours by everybreatheverymove

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**Summary:** (High school AU.) 17-year-old Mike Wheeler has never had much luck with girls he's interested in, but he's not helpless. In order to make some cash, Mike writes romantic love letters for money. It's completely harmless and nobody suspects a thing. But everything goes to shit when he gets paid to write a letter to his best friend, the girl he's totally in love with: El Hopper.

**dear reader, sincerely yours**

"Mike!"

"Be down in a second!"

His knee bumps the bottom of his desk as he swivels around in his chair, knocking over a pile of books in the process, "Shit." Mike groans, reaching for the fallen stack of novels.

At seventeen years old, Mike Wheeler has his future all planned out. Well, for the most part.

He's going to graduate top of his class — or at least somewhere near the top, he hopes. He's gonna attend college, with a major in something boring and a minor in something worthwhile. He's going to *write*.

(That's it. That's literally his whole plan.)

(It's all he knows.)

Books successfully piled up against the side of his old desk, Mike uncaps his pen once more. He bites into the plastic lid, brows knitting in deep concentration as he focuses on the page in front of him. He scribbled out the same sentence a handful of times now, repeatedly thinking that it works and then changing his mind.

Reading over the short letter, Mike considers tossing it in the trash and just starting over from scratch. Again.

*Dear Caroline,*

*I don't know if you're going to remember this, but a couple of months ago we played seven minutes in heaven at your cousin's house party and you kissed me. It was short, sweet, and it was my first kiss. But this isn't why I'm writing to you. Well, not really.*

*The truth is, I kept something of yours. You had a small hair clip in your hair that night, and you took it out right before they closed the door on us. I don't know if you were drunk or not, but for whatever reason, you told*

*me to hold it and keep it safe. We both totally forgot about it, but it turns out I've had it this whole time. I found it at the bottom of my wardrobe.*

*I'm not a romantic person, but I think maybe now I believe in fate. See, I was having a bad time the other day and then I found your hairclip, and it brought a smile to my face. Like, a huge smile. And you did that. You kissed me on a dare, and months later I guess it still meant enough to me to brighten up my whole day.*

*I'm probably overthinking this, I don't know. Maybe it wasn't fate. Maybe it was just a happy coincidence. But I just want to say thank you. For giving me your little bee clip to keep safe and making me smile. For trusting me with this small task. And if you're free this Saturday, I was wondering if you wanted to hang out. It wouldn't be a date— not unless you wanted it to be. Just two kids getting popcorn or something. Friends?*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Your not-so-secret admirer, Parker Collins*

His mom's voice rings out across the house then, "Mike, you're gonna be late!" She shouts up the stairs, probably standing with a heeled foot tapping against the bottom step, a perfectly manicured hand on her hip, and a curler or two still in her hair.

"Fuck," Mike mutters, slamming the notebook shut. "I said I'm coming!"

The letter needs to be completed and posted by the time school lets out today, envelope sealed and signed by one not-so-secret admirer.

It will have to do, for now, he thinks. Maybe he'll have time to finish it in study hall. If not, he'll just give Parker half his money back and tell him to finish it for tomorrow.

He reaches for the backpack laid at the foot of his bed and pulls it open to slip the notepad inside, stuffing in a couple of pens and pencils and his calculator. And a few envelopes that he slides out from the second drawer of his desk.

Standing up, he double-checks his back pocket with a pat, making sure his wallet is already in there. With a nod to himself, Mike

quickly swipes his hoodie from the hanger on the back of his wardrobe door before he leaves the room, barreling down the stairs at a record pace.

He hops down the final few steps, landing with a thud and receiving a disapproving look from his mother, "Sorry," he says, sheepish with his hands held up. He stalks into the kitchen then, snagging a piece of bacon from the full plate of breakfast laid out in front of his sister.

"Hey!" Holly Wheeler, nine years old and preciously *adorable*, tries to swat his hand away, but Mike has already moved back. He picks up a cup of coffee from the table — the lone mug placed directly in front of Mike's usual seat.

"Were you finishing up your homework?" His mom asks, and she runs her hands down the front of her apron, wiping away soap suds. "So many essays lately." She sounds almost proud, as though she's in awe of the amount of work the school has been giving him.

Mike doesn't even blink when he replies, "Yep." He nods, adding a simple, "Group project. I was double-checking my part," for good measure. What his mom doesn't know won't hurt her.

The teen takes a swig of coffee, letting the strong taste burn the back of his throat as his palms warm against the porcelain mug. He thumbs the handle with his free hand, walking around the kitchen and out of the doorway as his thoughts drift to the letter he'd been working on.

(Was it *too* nice?)

"Mikey," Holly shuffles herself around in her seat, hands gripping the back of her chair so she's facing him, legs pulled up onto the cushion, "have you seen my stickers?"

Mike's brows raise then and he tugs the strap of his backpack higher up his arm with his left hand, "Eh," he starts, "I don't think so." He shakes his head, "Why, which stickers are you missing?"

"The heart ones." His little sister answers with a pout, bottom lip curving outward as a frown takes over her face, "I only got them last

week," Holly tells him, "It was my last sheet and I need them for my diary."

"Your diary?" Mike chuckles, reaching over to place the half-empty mug down and grab his keys from out of the pot bowl by the front door. He clears his throat, letting a grin take over his face. "What do you need a diary for anyway, Hols? You got a secret boyfriend we're not supposed to know about?" he jokes, earning the smallest of giggles from the girl.

Holly's cheeks flush, and she presses her chin against the back of her hands, head tilting to the side to rest against the chair's wooden back, "No," she blinks up at her brother, eyelashes fluttering, "Not yet."

Mike smiles, and he starts for the front door, slowly backing up to the doorway. He holds his arms out in front of him, the left snatching a paper bag his mom is extending out to him with a nod of his head, and the right snapping in Holly's direction.

"I'll tell you what, how about I pick you up after your dance practice today and then we can go to the store?" He offers, shooting his mother a glance out of the corner of his eye. "And you can pick any stickers you want."

Across the room, Holly beams. She lifts her head, long blonde hair swinging in her ponytail with an eager nod, "Yes!" The baby pink ribbon in her hair sweeps across her shoulder when she reaches up to tighten the scrunchie. "Can we, Mom?"

"Two sheets." She says, holding up two fingers and sending Mike a pointed look. Then she turns to her youngest child, "You stuck them all over the inside of your wardrobe last time and your dad had to spend a whole afternoon peeling them off." Karen Wheeler—matriarch supreme—presses, leaning up against the kitchen counter now, "No more than two, okay?"

Holly simply rolls her eyes. "Okay." She whines, sounding defeated but nonetheless excited.

Mike's smile broadens, the corners of his eyes creasing in amusement. He winks, points to her, "Then it's a promise."

"But don't take her to the ice cream place this time, please. You know how she gets," Karen reminds her son, brown eyes warning as she raises a single perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"Okay, okay." He nods in agreement; left hand rubbing along the nape of his neck with his middle and index fingers crossed. The teen smirks, bobbing his head with a nod towards the front door, "I've gotta go. Lucas will be waiting for me." He spins around then, reaching for the handle just as Holly pipes up,

"Say hi to him for me," she calls out, one hand pressed against the side of her mouth as the other stabs a piece of pancake with her fork, "and El!"

Mike mutters something under his breath, throwing his head back. He stays facing the front door, fingers wrapped around the shiny knob, "You can tell her yourself!" He shouts back, finally opening the door, "See you later."

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When he gets to school sometime later, pulled into his usual parking spot and the car ignition turned off, Mike reaches into the back pocket of his jeans. He lifts the right side of his body up against the steering wheel, arms crooked and butt raised.

By some miracle, the cropped sheet of pink and red love heart stickers he'd stolen from Holly's arts and crafts box two nights ago didn't fall from his pocket when he was leaving the house. It'd been hanging out, the top right corner sticking out past the denim pouch.

The last thing Mike had wanted to do was explain why he'd stolen a nine-year-old girl's stickers. And he *definitely* didn't want to tell his family the truth. That those swirly pink, totally romantic stickers, you know, sealed the deal.

Mike straightens out the sheet before placing it down on the dashboard. He bites his bottom lip then, reaching for his backpack on the passenger seat. He pulls a simple black notebook from the bag and flips it open onto the page marked by a Post-It.

He's got a few things left to fix, to edit before it will be finished. Mike

has never been one for half-assing projects, and this is no different.

He places the sticky note onto the opposite page of lined paper and then neatly rips the whole page out of the notebook. He folds it in half, places it between his teeth to bite for a second as he does his backpack up again.

Tugging the bag up to his shoulder and picking up his keys from the console, Mike quickly jams the piece of paper into the right pocket of his unzipped hoodie.

There's a knock on the driver's window then, and Mike whips around to see his best friend peering in through the glass.

Lucas Sinclair, a nerd by nature and a jock by default, is standing with one hand on his hip and the other running back and forth over his hair. He's wearing his usual basketball jersey, the green and orange tones bright and bold against his dark complexion. The mesh top is tucked into the waistband of his blue jeans, held in place by a bright green belt. Only Lucas can pull it off, Mike thinks.

There's a slight stubble to his face, a small patch of hair just sitting on his jaw as though it's waiting, *begging* to be shaved off—a teenager's attempt at goatee, probably. He didn't have it before the weekend.

The sides of his hands are pressed up against the glass window, and he's cupping his own face. After a moment, he raps on the window with a bent middle finger, class ring thumping against the glass.

Mike quickly swipes the stickers from his dashboard, and he moves to pull his door open just as he thrusts against the steering wheel once more, hurriedly shoving the sheet back into his pocket.

(He forgot the envelope anyway so...)

"What are you doing?" Lucas steps back to give Mike room to get out of the car.

"Nothing," Mike says without hesitation.

"Okay," Lucas says, trailing off. His hands find his hips again, a grin taking over his features. "I'll be honest, it looked like you were trying



to fuck the wheel."

"What?" Mike scowls, and he clenches his keys in his hand after locking the car, "No."

His friend just shrugs, "Whatever, bro." He lays a hand on Mike's shoulder then, fingers pinching the skinnier boy's skin beneath his hoodie, "Dustin has a girlfriend."

Mike blinks, "Wait, what?" He squeaks, voice rising in pitch, "When did this happen?"

"Stacey's party on Friday night." Lucas tells him, "You missed all the action. Troy got kicked in the nuts, Rebecca D got caught cheating on Adam S." The two boys make for the school then, strolling toward the entrance at a leisurely pace.

"And Dustin..."

Lucas snorts, and he sends Mike as look as they cross over the threshold into the school. "And Dustin asked out some nerd from chem," he says, "Suzie *something*. Says she's his girlfriend."

(Definitely not Mike's handiwork.)

"Oh." Mike swallows down a sigh, Adam's apple bobbing. He nods his head as though in a daze, "Well, that's good." He suggests, stopping in his tracks when Lucas grabs him by the arm. "Right?"

"For him." Lucas confirms, "Not for you. Dude, you're the only one of us who's never had a girlfriend."

Mike stills. And then he throws out, weakly, "Will has never had a girlfriend."

"Will's gay and he's taking his time." Lucas gives him a knowing look, "You're not, so you can't use that excuse. And I know you're into girls because I remember what happened when we went to see Star Wars again last year. Don't think I don't."

Mike's cheeks flush, and he swats his friend's hand away. "Dude!" He scolds him, "You promised you'd never bring that up again."

"It's happened to all of us, chill." Lucas rolls his eyes, "The point is if Dustin can get a girlfriend then so can you."

"Do you ever think that maybe I don't need anyone?" Mike raises two long eyebrows in challenge, lips pulled thin. He puffs his cheeks out, waiting for Lucas' response.

(It's totally possible — that he could be happier without a girlfriend, a significant other. Maybe he's better off alone. Maybe he's happy *enough* , and that's good enough for now. Maybe that's how it's meant to me. Maybe he likes solitude. Obviously it's not true, but it *could* be.)

(Maybe there's a reason he's never asked a girl out or had a girl ask him out.)

(Oh, yeah. That was it. Cowardice.)

(Well, cowardice, the fear of rejection, and not wanting to screw up one of the most important relationships in his life.)

"Okay, fair." Lucas licks his lips, jabbing a finger against the taller boy's chest. It doesn't hurt, but Mike flinches all the same. "But that doesn't mean you don't *want* any-"

"Hey!"

(El.)

(Shit.)

"Hey." Mike greets the girl with a small nod as she approaches them.

Jane Hopper, or simply 'El' to her closest friends and family members — nickname chosen by Mike when they were eleven years old and she fell off the swing set in his backyard.

(How to describe El?)

She's...everything to him.

She's hazel eyes with specks of honey floating in them like gold flakes

in vodka. She's shoulder-length hair dyed brown and illuminated by the warm Indiana sun. She's soft-spoken words and dictionaries when somebody says something too complex. She's warm, freshly-baked waffles in winter, with thick knits stolen from him and leggings she borrows from Max. She's the girl with the full lips that deserve to be kissed and the perfect tan even when she's sick. She's seventeen years' worth of perfection all wrapped up in half a cheer uniform and half a summer dress.

She's his first kiss, his best girl friend. She's his whole heart.

Feeling Lucas' dark eyes burning a hole through his skull, Mike diverts his gaze. He drops his eyes down to the floor, taking in the scuffed-up Chucks on her feet. She's scribbled stuff all along the white side-strip of both shoes, words in black Sharpie and little sketches and doodles drawn in some kind of red ink.

Mike smiles when he catches sight of the small arrow drawn on her left shoe, pointing up toward her. (He drew that one.)

She's wearing the top half of her uniform, having tucked the tight cheer tee into the waistband of her cord dress, and she has one of her dad's massive plaid shirts thrown over her shoulders. Her hair is half-pulled up at the back, kept in place by a thick butterfly clip. Mike thinks she looks beautiful.

"Mike?"

"Hm?" He hums, blinking back his daze. "Yeah, what?"

"Are we still on for studying later?" She smiles up at him, arms winding behind her back as she bounces up on the balls of her feet, trying and failing to meet him at eye level, as always. "You know, you still haven't taught me the true meaning of *irony*."

Mike can't do anything but smile, eyes wide and lips parting. He stammers after a beat, licking dry lips. He ignores the second part of what she says for fear of Lucas cracking jokes. "I, uh... I have to pick up Holly first though. I kinda promised her we could go to the store after school to buy something."

(Tell her, Mike. Tell El that you stole your little sister's sticky hearts because you need them to seal envelopes containing love letters to anyone and everyone *but* her.)

(Tell her that you can't work up the nerve to write her *another* one. Tell her it would be too hard.)

"That's cool," El shrugs, "You know I love her." She reminds him with a smile, "She's like the little sister I never had."

Lucas interrupts the moment with a cough, fist pressed up against his mouth as he whispers something that sounds vaguely like " *in-law*." He stops snickering when Mike kicks him in the calf however, reaching down to grab the muscle there, "What the hell!"

"Anyway," El starts, and she reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ears, a few stray waves curling around her face. She wiggles her eyebrows, sending Mike a look. She shifts her gaze back and forth between the two boys, awkwardly folding her arms over her chest, "See you guys at lunch."

"Yeah, bye El!" Lucas waves after her with the hand not gripping his leg, almost falling into Mike's side when he loses balance.

Mike glares down at him as soon as El has walked away, but there's a noticeable grin on his face. He pulls Lucas up by the armpit, letting him lean against him, "Quit being dramatic, I barely even hit you."

"I'm on the basketball team, Mike. My legs are my livelihood." Lucas points out, "Just as your mouth is *your* livelihood."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, man." Lucas sighs, "Nothing." He moves to stand up straight then, kicking his leg out in front of him, stretching and twisting his ankle around as his lips curl up into a lopsided smile again, "So studying, huh?"

Mike closes his eyes, already knowing what Lucas is getting at. "What?"

Lucas shrugs, "I don't know, is that like code or something?" He

presses his index finger against his chin, fake pondering, "Maybe you're studying *her*?" He taps his finger twice, "or maybe you're the subject."

"I'm helping her in English."

"And...*I'm* speaking English." Lucas points out, ringed-finger wagging.

"Shut up." Mike brushes him off, "She's just behind. You know that."

"Yeah, except I haven't been tutoring her for over four years and pretending I'm not completely in love with every poorly constructed sentence that comes out of her mouth." Lucas jabs, "Seriously, man. You're really not discrete. It's painfully obvious at this point."

"Well, *she* doesn't know. Does she?" Mike points toward the corridor El disappeared down. "And if she hasn't figured it out already then I think I'm doing a pretty good job of pretending."

"Sure." Lucas stifles a laugh, "Keep telling yourself that."

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"Has he done it yet?"

The brunette lifts her gaze then, eyebrows furrowing together in confusion. She leans closer, whispers, "Has who done what?" with a frown, at a total loss.

Max Mayfield, her best friend, is a hot-headed motormouth. She has zero boundaries and oozes confidence. She's all red hair, striped cropped tops, and bright scrunchies. And freckles. Her face is littered with freckles — the pale kind that only come out after an afternoon spent in the sunshine.

(Not like Mike's, El thinks. His are always there; no matter if it's sunny or if they're in his basement — the only light illuminating their faces coming from the television and giving El the perfect opportunity to count his freckles.)

Slamming her hands down on the bench, Max quirks a single brow, the corners of her lips pulling into a wicked grin as she husks, dramatically for effect, "*Mike*."

"Has Mike done *what*?" El blinks, and suddenly her shoulders erupt in goosebumps.

(She can tell where this conversation is going, and she's really not in the talking mood right now. Not when she's going to get poked and probed for some information she doesn't have.)

"Asked you out," Max says, lowering her head as the words slip out as though she wants only El to hear her this time. She shoots a look over her shoulder at their other friend.

Dustin — last name Henderson, middle names 'Class Clown of the Year' — is sat behind her on the bleachers, one hand running through his curls and the other scraping melted cheese off of the tray where his overstuffed burger sat. He's mumbling to himself as he smashes his fingers together, watching the cheese stick to the middle one.

He licks his lips, raising his hand up to his mouth to scrape the melted cheese from his skin with a drag of his upper teeth, a stringy glob landing on the crotch of his beige corduroys. "Ah, shit." He scratches at the rough material like a madman.

(Max doubts he's listening.)

She whips back around to El with raised brows as though to say "Can you believe that weirdo?" Max slides further along their shared bench, sneakers scraping the concrete below her feet. "So?" She pries.

"Like, how?" El shifts, growing more uncomfortable by the second. She drums her fingers on the sticky tray lay beside her, avoiding her friend's gaze. "Like, on a date?"

Max rolls her eyes, "Yes, on a date."

El swallows down a deep breath then, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth. She meets Max's eye, hazel meeting ice-cold blue, "What kind of date?"

"I don't know, El." The redhead shrugs, shoulders raised as she starts spurting suggestions, "Dinner and a bad movie. Making out behind a dumpster with his hands on your tits." She suggests, groping her own breasts in demonstration. El just flushes, so Max continues, "Feeding

some of those cute billy goats down at the petting zoo. Skinny dipping after hours." Max smirks, "I don't know what kind of freaky shit you're into. And you don't either so really you could be into anything."

"No, he-" El starts, and she pushes fallen brown locks of hair behind her ears, ignoring her friend's suggestion. Her soft curls bounce, delicately framing her face.

(Her dad once told her she reminded him of her mother; delicate and feminine with steel-coating.)

"He hasn't. But I've never really expected him to, so it's fine."

"It's not *fine* !" Max exclaims, and she reaches forward for El's hands then. She cradles her wrists gently, comforting, "Hopper, prom is in a week. You need a date. And Wheeler has been *stringing* you along like a dog on a leash for the better part of ten years. And I know you, alright? I know you're not just gonna go with any other Average Joe that asks you." Max says with a shake of the head.

El's nose scrunches, "Who?"

"It's an expression." Max clarifies, still keeping a hold of her hands, "It means, like, anyone. You know, some random."

"That's assuming *anyone* asks me."

"Please, haven't you noticed that every single girl in our grade is being, like...courted or whatever?" The girl pulls a face at the word, not liking the way it tastes on her tongue. "I mean, honestly, it's kind of weird and a little creepy. But, El, even the ugly girls are getting dates. Boyfriends, even!" She exclaims, "And like, I know I'm supposed to be all woke and shit, but you know what I mean. The girls you wouldn't ever expect to date anyone in high school are just..." she snaps her fingers matter-of-factly, "snapping up dates."

"And Jennifer Hayes is a confirmed lesbian now! Some dude on the swim team finally asked her out and she got all weird for a hot second but then got the courage to come out. Everyone's getting some." She pulls on El's hands, tugging them towards her. They knock

over a ketchup pot, and the girls watch as the condiment drips all over a half-eaten plate of French fries sat abandoned on Max's tray on the ground.

"Oh, goddamn it." Dustin gapes from behind the redhead, completely out of the loop.

Watching him for a second, Max's smiles sheepishly over at her friend, and then she turns her head back around to face El, "You're next."

"You don't know that." El denies, and her gaze drops to the spilled ketchup, "And maybe I don't want to be asked out by any old random."

"You haven't gotten a letter yet?" Max asks her, and El is definitely lost now.

"Letter?" She swallows a breath, unsure of what's to come, "No...Was I supposed to?"

(How is she so out of the loop? About everything?)

Max breathes out, "Damn, OK," She taps her feet on the floor, legs bouncing up and down — Mike's do the same when he's anxious, El notes. "So, rumor has it-" she licks her lips, clicking her tongue just as a loud yelp echoes out across the bleachers.

Lucas is bent over one of the lower benches, hands clutching his sides as though he's doubled over in pain. It takes her a moment, but El realizes he's laughing; though it's more of a cackle.

Mike is beside him, Will is a few feet behind. Will Byers, El's darling step-brother with his mismatching socks, perpetually tired eyes, and quiet demeanor.

"Yo!" Lucas waves a hand about, other arm bending back to rub along his shoulder-blades on a weird angle, "Babe, did you save me some fries?"

Max reaches down, pulling up the half-empty tray of food. "You could just queue in the goddamn cafeteria for once, you know. I'm not your



mom, Sinclair."

Dustin snorts then, and it sounds like he inhales, chokes back whatever is in his mouth. "But he's your daddy," he jokes.

Max cranes her neck, peering over at the curly-haired boy. She picks up a French fry and throws it at him, "Hey, you wanna live to go on that date with Suzy Q?"

"If you could refrain from referring to my girlfriend as a Hostess treat, it would be *much* appreciated," the boy says.

"Your girlfriend?" She huffs, "oh my god, you haven't even gone out with her yet!" Max throws her head back with a disbelieving shake, "Seriously."

Dustin just holds her gaze, eyes wide as he lifts his middle finger to his lips again. He licks the tip, grossly raising his eyebrows in suggestion as he flips her off. "Bite me, Mayfield."

"One more word." Max threatens, an unreadable look on her face. But when she turns back to El, her expression is softer. Well, soft but also somehow scheming and it just screams *evil*.

El's attention is very much focused on the tall teen boy stood several feet away. Max waves a hand in her face, tapping her index finger on the tip of El's nose.

"Hey!" The redhead says, forcing El's eyes to her own, "Don't look at him. Look at me." Max cups her face between her hands, refocusing her friend's attention until she's staring directly at her.

El's cheeks are flushed, and the curls she'd tucked back seem to have come forward as though by their own control. She's chewing on her bottom lip, bruising and chapping it, bug-eyed as though she's just been caught doing something she shouldn't have.

(She really is too wholesome to be real, Max thinks to herself with a grin, left corner of her lips twitching up in adoration.)

(No wonder Wheeler is so besotted.)

"Stop daydreaming, I'm trying to tell you something." Max nods, waiting for El to break out of her 'Mike trance' — she called it that once; half-asleep in Max's bed, tired from a pizza binge and a gossip-filled sleepover that started at two in the afternoon.

"So, basically, rumor has it, if someone is interested in you, they leave some, like, *sappy* note in your locker." She informs the girl, keeping her voice as the hoys approach.

"Sappy?"

"Yeah, you know, romantic. But also kind of cringe." She says, nodding as if El is going to understand, "Like, the kinda crap guys always say in movies. Those long speeches."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

El frowns at that. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Mike shimmying along one of the lower benches. He throws himself down onto the wooden seat, straddling it with long legs. "Why would I want a sappy note in my locker?" El says, eyes drifting back and forth between the two — Max who's staring at her and Mike who seemed to be avoiding her. There's no reason for him to be sitting so far away.

"I don't know. I guess they're not *all* the same. Stacey had one once that said something about fooling around under the bleachers so I guess some are a little dirtier or whatever. I'm pretty sure they're all written by the same dude though. They're just too similar, you know?"

"I thought you just said different guys were writing them."

"No, I'm pretty sure it's *one* poor loser who's doing it." Max pulls on the scrunchies around one of her braids, "I just can't figure out what he's getting in return. Street cred, maybe." Max shrugs, briefly shooting Lucas a look over her shoulder. He's sat in front of Mike, hands clasped in his lap as the pair listen to Will talk. But Lucas' eyes are on Max, and he keeps quirked one eyebrow.

(El notices the exchange between her two friends; the couple communicating without words, several feet away from each other.)

They both nod at one another, and Max sighs, setting her eyes on El. "My point is, mostly everyone who's a girl and into guys and single has been gotten one lately. Which means it's nearly your turn."

"Maybe I won't get one," El reasons, and she reaches forward to snag a fry from the plate Max has placed in between them. She hitches a brow, looking over at the Mike out of the corner of her eye as she bites down into the crunchy potato with a delighted hum, "Maybe I'll be the exception."

"No. I guarantee you, you'll get one. You're too *good* to not." Max tells her, "You're cute, and nice, and you're not, like, at the very bottom of the social ladder and that's always a plus. I mean, you're a cheerleader, right? All straight guys love cheerleaders. Not the most popular one but... Trust me, some dude is out there right now trying to figure out what to say to you. You just wanna hope he's not ugly." Max sits back on her hands, left leg swinging.

"Hey."

El diverts her attention from the redhead then, glancing up to see Mike stood right beside her. He's got a bottle of water in one hand, and a small brown packet of M&Ms in the other.

"Hi." She smiles, toothy, and then she licks her lips, "I'll scoot."

"I mean, you're good." Mike shrugs, and he sticks out his arm, extending the open packet toward her. "Sweet tooth?"

El beams up at him, and she throws her leg over the bench so she's directly facing him, making sure to not knock over her Coca-Cola. She opens her palm, blinking, "Always."

Mike smiles, and he plops himself down across from her, shaking the bag in her hand until a few candies slip out. Red and yellow and green. He places his water down, watching as she shuffles her feet along the concrete, wiggling closer and wedging them between his own.

"Hey, where is everyone by the way?" Lucas asks, stood beside Max, fingers running through his girlfriend's hair, tugging on a loose braid. "There was no one in the line today. You know, because I looked in on the way over."

"Probably prepping the gym," Will suggests. "You know, for prom."

"Man, the theme is so bad this year."

El frowns, eyes downcast, "I don't know, I kind of like it."

"Of course you would." Will chuckles, and he sits down on the bench behind the girls. "Hopper's always blasting the same songs on repeat. There's only so many times I can listen to 'Hound Dog' without going crazy."

"Well, I'll be damned." Dustin speaks up, "The chief of police is a rock and roll man? Mind-blowing."

"Not as mind-blowing as the dress El wants to wear." Max clears her throat, and she shoots Mike a look that lasts all of two seconds. "It's so short."

"It's not that short." El corrects her, "Just above the knees." She explains, hands waving over her legs where the dress supposedly cuts off. Thigh-length.

Will leans forward, "You bought it yet?"

"It's too expensive." El peers over at her brother, forlorn, "Maybe there'll be a similar one next year and I'll have saved up by then."

"Well, either way, you're gonna need a cute outfit." The other girl tells her, laying a hand on her arm. She rests back on her hands, "It's *prom*."

Dustin speaks up, a mouthful of French fries and smeared ketchup around his lips. "Yeah, because it's so important."

"I mean, it is important." Max argues, pouting, "That's, like, when people have sex and stuff." Her voice is a pitch higher, and she shakes her head from side to side so her thick braids swing.

"Sex *or* stuff, I think."

"I thought that was Homecoming."

"Same shit," Mike argues, a clear frown on his face, "It's so stupid anyway."

"You're just saying that because you're dateless." Max narrows her eyes, "If you weren't, I guarantee you'd be out buying condoms right now."

Next to her, El has gone quiet. She places the final M&M on her tongue, skillfully avoiding Mike's eye. Instead, she focuses on the patch of old gum stuck to the bench he's sat on, pink with a piece of wrapper still on it.

Her change in demeanor doesn't go unnoticed — at least not by Mike. He watches as she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, gently biting the reddening flesh there, almost drawing blood from a slightly crooked tooth.

"Is that all you talk about?" He asks suddenly, snapping to Max. His hands drop to his knees, hunched over so his hands hover close to El.

"Sex?" Max quips, hair falling into her face. She flicks it back over her shoulder with a nod, "Yes. I'm a teenager. That's what we're supposed to do."

El's fingers twitch in her lap, lacing together. Arching forward, she leans closer to the lanky teen. Her nails scrape along Mike's knuckles without actually touching him, drawing soft lines in the dips of his skin.

His breath stills, but he doesn't move, doesn't pull away — not even when El quite clearly reaches for his hand because she *wants* to, wrapping slender fingers around his wrist. She flips his hand over, eyeing the inside of his watch as though innocently looking for the time. The empty candy packet in his other crunches in his fist, Mike's cheeks turning a slight shade of pink.

"At least those of us that aren't half robot like you, Wheeler," Max throws in, "maybe if your junk worked you wouldn't have all this

pent-up *prick* energy all the time."

"That's such bullshit." Mike shakes his head, and he finally flinches back from El's touch, dropping his hands to his sides.

(He doesn't catch the disappointed look on her face this time.)

"How is it bullshit?" The girl pulls her leg up on the bench, clasping her hands around her knee, "You can't judge people for wanting something you don't, Mike."

"I'm not judging. I'm just saying, you make it out like everything is about sex and it's not."

Next to Max, he can spot Lucas running a hand back and forth in front of his throat, as though warning him to stop talking.

"How would you know? You're too chicken shit to even ask someone out."

(Too late.)

"I mean, fuck, Wheeler, it's not hard." Max blurts out, "or, you know, maybe it *is*. I guess we'll never know."

"Max." El warns her, breaking her silence, tone of voice more hostile than usual. There's still a smile on her face though — ever the picture of grace and purity. But eventually the kind look on her face falls and her smile turns sour, "Shut it."

As if on cue, the bell rings. And Mike doesn't have to deal with Max and *what she said* for the rest of the day.

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He's only just peeled the smallest love heart sticker from off of the sheet when somebody interrupts him. Luckily for him, it's nobody important. Well, nobody in his immediate circle of friends.

"Wheeler," a ten-dollar bill slides across the table, the folded corners sticking up and catching Mike's attention. "You got time?"

Mike has his head buried in the letter from this morning, fingers of

his left hand stretched wide to hold the paper flat against the desk as he writes something down, signing it — *Your not-so-secret admirer, Parker Collins.*

His eyes drift from the money up to the boy stood on the other side of the desk after a moment, "Yeah?" He finally lets out.

Leaning back in his seat, Mike drops his pencil onto the desk. He watches as it rolls along the wooden surface, the rubber tip catching on a corner of the paper. It's frayed, been scrunched up in someone's pocket for too long.

He quickly folds the letter in half, finalized and complete. He slides an envelope across the desk, slipping the finished letter inside and plucking the sticker from off the back of his hand where it was waiting to be used. Mike presses the pink sticker to the center of the top flap, sealing it shut over the bottom one. He flips it over, scrawls 'Caroline' in thick black ink.

When he pulls the envelope up to his lips to blow it dry, the boy across from him catches sight of the other notebook laid open for nosy eyes to read. There's a fancy scrawl written across the top of the right page, "*Elliott and the Great Mystery of the Female Species*" that's been stricken out. Under it, "*The Boy and the Lost Princess.*"

Mike glances up at the jock stood on the other side of the library desk. He's got his hands on his hips, an oversized basketball jersey hanging from his lean frame and bunched around his hips, the waistband of his matching shorts too low. His neck is bent ever so slightly to the side, and he's trying to see what Mike has written, lips moving in silence as he reads the first couple of words to himself.

The black-haired boy frowns, moving to slap the cover of the notebook to a close, catching the letter in the middle. "What happened to the *last* one?"

"Yeah, about that," the basketball star pulls the chair opposite Mike out from under the desk, fingers firmly curled over the back. It drags against the tiled floor with a creak, the old wood splintered and weakened from years of use. The athlete cringes, rushing to sit down before any more noise can be made, "It didn't work out." He says,

nonchalant.

"Maybe you didn't copy it right."

"Oh, I copied it right. I even had Brad read it." The boy runs a hand through his locks, sounding less than impressed, "It's your letter that sucked, bro."

"Maybe you should have just used my version then," Mike tells him, "works for everyone else. It's not my fault you wanted to copy it."

"Yeah, well, I figured it'd be more personal coming from me." James counters, "I don't know, maybe it's girly penmanship that gets chicks wet."

James — basketball star extraordinaire, team captain, Hawkins High's resident playboy — casts his eyes around the room. It's like he's on the lookout, waiting for somebody to jump out from behind a bookcase and spook him. Maybe he's just paranoid someone's gonna find him, of all places, in the library.

Or maybe it's the thought of being seen talking to Mike Wheeler that has him on edge.

Granted, Mike's not unpopular, but it's not like he's the hottest shit around school either. He's just always present, always *there*. He's not bullied (anymore), and he doesn't get shoved into lockers by jocks every morning.

Mike just supposes that he comes off as that one nerdy writer kid with the ink-stained fingers, unruly hair, and an ever-growing reputation as some kind of low rent poet.

And it's totally fine because everybody knows who Mike is and what he does. At least, most of the boys in school — the upperclassmen especially. They know what kind of business Mike is sneakily running from out of the back of the library (or the student parking lot on the off-chance the library is closed.)

(He *hopes* his friends don't know. Lucas would never let him live it down and Dustin wouldn't ever stop cracking jokes — or asking for Mike to write letters for him. Will wouldn't care too much, Mike



supposes. He'd probably just tell him how wrong it is and that he shouldn't be penning love notes to random girls when he can't even come clean to El, who also just so happens to be Will's step-sister.)

Somehow, not a single girl — well, aside from that one chick who's always hanging out beneath the bleachers who eavesdropped and wormed her way into Mike's business — has ever managed to catch on to the scheme. Which, well, that works out better for everyone, really. They're none the wiser, the people wanting the letters are provided with a service, and Mike is making easy money.

(It's not like he needs it though. His family's sufficiently well off, and he works weekends down at the movies.

But a little extra cash never hurt anyone. And, besides, writing short but sweet letters isn't exactly a challenge. It comes naturally to him; writing, that is. And love, well, he's felt that — the *good kind*, the heart-wrenching, maddening kind — since he was twelve years old. So writing love letters, even for people he feels nothing for? A piece of cake, really. Plus, it's not like he's ever owned up to being in love with her aloud so it's really no big deal if he's emotionally cheating on the simple idea of loving her.

It's easy to pretend to like someone, to offer false flattery. It's never been a problem: empty complimenting someone. He's been brought up on a diet of lies and deceit and miscommunications. He's a middle child living the middle-class suburban dream.

His parents fell out of love years ago and yet their relationship is still intact because they've repaired the tears with tape and glue, stitched their family back together (time and time again) with thread and a sharp, sharp needle. They're held together with bobby pins and band-aids. They brush their problems over with emulsion and love their children with dollar bills. His dad buys love, and his mom is a cookie-baking Stepford nightmare in sheep's clothing.

Mike learned the art of fooling people years ago. He's the core of a nuclear family trained in the fine art of lying your way into people's hearts.)

Truth be told, Mike's not even entirely sure he remembers how this

whole thing started. If he had to guess, he would say it had been that day back in sophomore year: he'd been scribbling something down on a lined piece of paper, just minding his own business and trying to work up *some* courage — not a whole lot, but he'd been close to having just about enough. And then the note had been snatched from his fingers before he could stop it, and some asshole from the football team had read it aloud to an otherwise empty locker room. He'd laughed, snorted, called Mike a 'pussy', but then something had happened. His face changed; mockery turned to curiosity, and curiosity turned to intrigue. And he'd gone on to tell a couple of his friends about *the sophomore who could be everyone's Romeo*.

A day later, the captain of the football player cornered him in the library and gave him ten bucks to address a letter — in his name, obviously — to the head cheerleader at the time; some preppy blonde whom Mike distinctly remembers liked orange-flavored lollipops and peppermint chewing gum. Apparently, the guy had taken her out on a date the week before and, because he'd been still waiting to hear back from her, he wanted to make a good impression by wooing her '*just a little bit, dude. You know how it is... I guess. I don't know.*' )

(Mike still thinks about that one particular letter sometimes. It was somehow perfect. For a first draft, for both parties involved.)

*Dear Hailey,*

*When I saw you at the pep rally on Friday night, it's safe to say my mind was blown. Not just because you looked stunning, but because seeing you just reminded me of what I blew. You're the embodiment of every teenage guy's fantasy. Beautiful, smart, with killer moves to boot. Like, the cheer squad would be remiss if they didn't have you because you're the single greatest thing that ever happened to them.*

*And I know our date last Thursday didn't go so well. I was distracted the whole time. Because of the game and everyone's expectations of me, yeah, but I guess I just couldn't quite believe that you'd actually agreed to go out with me. And you deserved all of my attention. All of it. You really did. It took me so long to finally work up the courage to ask you ask if you can believe that, and I'm sorry I blew it on my first try. But trust me when I say I was distracted during the game too. But only by you.*

*And if you'd let me, I'd love another chance. We can go wherever you want, do whatever you like. No parties though. I just want to pay attention to you this time. Let me know.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Your not-so-secret admirer, Clifford Thomas.*

*PS: Orange lollipops are totally boss.*

(Mike bullshitted the whole thing. But it had worked. After that, the jock dated the cheerleader, word got around, Clifford Thomas paid Mike double the day after his second date with Hailey, and the boy was officially in business.)

(And the letter Mike had been working on —the one he'd intended to sign in his own name, to slip into *her* locker at the time — got folded up and shoved into his wallet, never to be seen or touched again, still only half-complete even a year later.)

(All he has to do is pay attention to anyone and everyone, be the fly that never takes off from the wall. All he has to do is memorize a few details about everyone; remember what candy Girl A likes and which horror movie Girl B went to go see with Boy C. Thankfully, his 'customers' usually come bearing details and he doesn't have to stalk dozens of girls. All he has to do is put feelings to ink.)

Mike sighs, nostrils flaring as he breathes out, "Dude, I don't know what you want me to do."

He leans forward in his seat, hands clasping together atop the desk as his eyes catch on the swaying strings of his green hoodie. He purses his lips with a shrug, "I delivered on my end. I just translated what you said." Mike tells him, internally cringing as he remembers James' vulgar choice of words. There wasn't a chance in hell Mike was ever going to write exactly what he'd asked for, "I did what you said."

"I know," James pulls a face, as though he's all too aware of the fact that Mike did *him* a favor, a service. "But now I need you to do it again. And I'll use yours this time." He wiggles his eyebrows, shoving the ten-dollar bill closer to Mike with his index finger and a fake

cough.

Mike sighs, but not without an eye-roll, "I've upped my price."

"What?!" James shrieks and he fists the bill then, clenching it tight as a scowl takes over his face, "since when?" He blinks, head rolling back as he eyes Mike considerably, pulling the money back toward his side of the desk, "and how much?" He nods, flicks his head just once in Mike's direction as though he's prepared to barter.

"Fifteen." Mike smiles, teeth-baring and shit-eating, "Repeat customers and all that." He shrugs, black hair falling into his face, "Depends how badly you want the date, I guess."

James rolls his eyes, and he kicks his feet up onto the edge of the desk, rubber soles of his sneakers squeaking against the wood. Mike pulls a face. "You know I could just beat you up, right? You weigh like, what, a hundred and forty pounds, give or take." The brunet folds his arms over his chest, clenching his biceps so they flex in the process, "Easy."

"You could," Mike agrees, ignoring the threat entirely, "but then I'd be incapacitated and you'd have no one to write your *bullshit* letters for you."

He slides his hands down the cover of his notebook, lips pursing as though he's deep in thought. They fall apart with a squelch and smack together again with a clack of his teeth. "And then, you know, whatever poor girl you're trying to con this week is gonna move on, and you're gonna be alone...until *another* girl comes along."

(If only he had such a way with words when it came to matters of the heart and not matters of...finance?)

"But I still won't be able to write anything for you because, well, let's say, you damaged my hand while you were beating me up." His eyes brighten, shoulders rising and falling, "It'd be a real shame if you fucked up my hand so bad I could no longer write, right?" He asks, and his eyes blow wide, eyebrows drawn up to his hairline as a grin takes over his features.

"You're so full of shit, Wheeler," James shakes his head, and he leans across the desk to pinch the skin of Mike's hand, right between his knuckles.

Shaking his hand, Mike frowns, "and then, you know, the cycle's just gonna start again and every single girl that you think wants to screw you is gonna have a boyfriend because, well, maybe I lied and my hand wasn't broken, and I wrote letters for those guys instead."

"You really think your stupid letters are that good?"

"You tell me," Mike argues, "You're the one who needs them."

"This better be good, nerd. I'm not gonna pay you to just spew whatever boring crap you put in the last one." James gives him a pointed look, and he loosens the cash in his fist, empty hand reaching for his shorts. He pushes up in his seat, patting the side of his shorts, "Damnit, my wallet's in my jeans."

Mike reaches forward and snags the ten bucks from his hand then. "Think of it as a downpayment."

"Two-thirds of the price for just *asking* you?" James sighs, "How do I know you're gonna deliver?"

"Business, *bro*," Mike says, channeling his inner Lucas. (If he knew, he'd be proud. But he's never going to know.) "Besides, when do I not come through?"

James slams a hand down on the desk as though he can stop him, get his money back. Mike snatches it back though, quick as a cat, and he stuffs it into the empty pocket of his hoodie, "And just who am I addressing this one to?"

"Stacey."

" *Again* ?"

With an eye roll that almost blinds him — seriously, his eyes roll so far back that Mike actually thinks they might get stuck — the teen picks his pencil up from the desk. He brushes off the old rubber pieces before biting down on the stick, holding it between his teeth as

he reaches for the second notebook in his backpack.

"Same shit as last time, I guess?"

James frowns, casual and cool, "Obviously." He blinks, as though it's obvious.

The black book flops down on top of the grey one, and Mike pulls it open to a blank page. He plucks a couple of Post-It notes from the thin pile attached to the back cover, writing down 'James' and 'Stacey' and 'repeat' on one, and '\$5' on the other. He extends the second sticky note to James on the tip of his finger, moving it back and forth until he takes it.

He shoots the athlete a cocky look as he gathers his belongings then, mumbling with a smirk and a single raised brow, "Nice doing business with you."

James scowls, leaning back in his chair as his feet kick up onto the desk once again, his eyes scanning the Post-It as if in disgust. He dares another look around the room, scowling as he cups his hands around his mouth to shout after Mike, "Make it a good one, Wheeler!"

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He's speed-walking towards Caroline Clarke's locker when he spots Lucas.

He's got his back turned to Mike, stood outside the boys' restrooms as he talks to another member of the basketball team. Mike doesn't know his name, and he's pretty sure he's never talked to him before — so there's a high likelihood he won't mention anything to Lucas.

The problem now is that Mike can't just walk down the hallway, stop by some girl's locker, and post the letter in through the vent in the door. If he does, he risks Lucas finding out. And if his best friend finds out what he's up to — what he's *been* up to for a little over a year now — Mike is screwed.

There's a reason he always tells the guys who come asking for letters to not mention it to Lucas. Mike doesn't even want to imagine what kind of roasting he'd be in for.

Making his mind up, Mike backtracks then, though he keeps an eye glued to Lucas and his teammate around the corner. The other kid's got his hand pressed to the restroom door, and Lucas looks like he's heading inside. If he does, Mike will have ample opportunity to strike.

(He always posts the letter in the afternoon. He's not about to start operating differently now — just because his friend can't seem to decide if he needs to piss or not.

The restroom door creaks open suddenly, and Lucas is gone. The other boy is walking back down whence Mike just came.

Backpack sliding down his arm to his fingertips, Mike reaches for the main zip as he rounds the corner and heads straight for Caroline's locker. He slides along the waxed floor, left hand sticking out to steady himself.

Mike hitches the bag up onto his hip, leg raised for balance. He searches for a second, pulling the envelope out from between two binders. With a deep breath, he turns to face locker 213 with raised hands, backpack dropping down to his feet.

He jams the sealed letter into the widest crack in the metal door, forcing it inside. He pushes against one of the corners that stick out, nudging it forward with his fingernail.

It finally drops — landing with a soft thud — inside the girl's locker, and Mike reaches down to pick up his bag just in time to hear Lucas call out,

"Mike?"

He perks up, clutching the straps between his fists, "Hey!" He whips around on his feet, coming to face with his oldest friend.

"What are you doing, man?" Lucas raises a brow, curiosity clear on his face, "El still in practice, I guess?"

"Yeah." Turns out, his throat was a lot of drier than he'd thought. He smooths his hand along the base, rubbing the skin there until it turns red. "Yeah, she's not out yet."

Lucas nods, "You ask her out yet?"

"See, you say 'yet' as though you're just waiting for it to happen," Mike zipping his backpack closed. He makes a fist, knuckles scraping the metal as he raises his brows in question, "It's not an inevitability, Lucas. What makes you think I'm *ever* going to?"

A couple of feet away, Lucas is leaning back against the wall. There's a pinboard behind him, the corner of a band sign-up sheet scratching his bare shoulder when he crosses his arms, "Dude, you *have* to." He shakes his head, casting a glance down at his basketball jersey. The boy tugs the top from out of the waistband of his jeans, stretching out the hem with long fingers as a knowing expression stretches across his face, eyebrows raising, "If you don't-"

"If I don't, then she'll never know, and I'll be spared the embarrassment of having confessed my feelings to someone who *maybe* doesn't feel the same way." Mike says, and he tugs the strap of his backpack further up his arm now, "Easy."

Mike makes for the exit then, the bright red varnished doors shining off in the distance. No matter how old the doors are or how chipped the paint becomes, the sweet reprieve of an exit is still something of a comfort to Mike. Sure, he's in his element in school; he's got brains and just enough popularity to avoid getting bullied — those two years in middle school were more than enough.

But high school is essentially just a cesspool of teenagers making out, making mistakes and, for some, making what they think will be everlasting relationships.

(Mike is a fan of permanence.)

(A *ctual* permanence. Not the short-lived, high school kind.)

Ah, the sweet reprieve of freedom.

"You waiting for El?"

"That's why I'm still here." Mike says, "Well, that, and Holly still has ballet for another," he pauses to pull up the sleeve of his hoodie, glancing down at his watch, "ten minutes. You?"



"Dustin and burgers at Benny's."

The raven-haired boy grins, "Coach know you're a beef junkie?"

"Does Coach *need* to know? No." Lucas cracks, "I'm a growing boy, Mike. I need red meat to survive. Besides, someone has to stop Dustin from stealing Max's berry shake again." He explains, a hand gesturing about, "You know, because last time she kicked his ass and he called her a bitch." The athletic boy sighs, a slide of his tongue over his teeth as he adds as an afterthought, "I might have to defend her honor."

"Max? Honor?" Mike snorts, and he slips his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, right fist clenched, curling around some scraps of paper as he fingers his keys, "You know she could kick, like, *any* guy's ass, right? Not just Dustin's. She knocked Will from his scooter and fractured his ankle a whole week after he stepped on her foot because she said she needed time to 'perfect her revenge'."

Lucas just looks off in the distance, totally enamored at the thought, so Mike continues, "Your girlfriend's more than capable of handling herself."

"True. And I totally love her for it — Will incident aside." Lucas steps into line beside him then. He whips around, walking backward through the school entrance just as Mike pushes the doors open so he can face his friend directly, "But, back to the subject of you and your *lack* of a girlfriend," he smirks, side-stepping an inch to nudge Mike in the arm.

"Why are we still talking about this? I told you this morning. It's not happening."

"Because you've been ogling her for years and it's getting boring, man. And prom is *right* around the corner. I swear to fuck, Dustin nearly locked you both in that little bathroom in your basement last month," Lucas informs him, voice lowering, "Besides, you've seen the rate at which the guys in our school are getting girlfriends these days. It's ridiculous. There's, like, two girls for every guy now. Kevin M. went out with two separate chicks last week *alone*," and he holds both hands up in front of himself then, head shaking from side to side and

his palms pressing to over his heart, "I mean, *I'm* good. But single girls who could potentially be into you are becoming few and far between, Mike."

"So?" Mike stops in his tracks, and he waits for Lucas to copy. He's a few steps ahead, hands on his hips now, all-knowing and cocky, basketball jersey flowing in the light wind.

(God, when did Lucas become such a jock?)

A soft frown takes over Mike's features, his lips pursing in thought, "What should I care? You know I don't have interest in anyone," he rolls his eyes at the look on his friend's face then, "*else*. And that's going nowhere."

"It's going nowhere because you refuse to take it anywhere." Lucas reminds him. "You can't wait for things to just happen to you." He hums, "Or for you. Grab life by the balls every once in a while, Mike."

Mike shakes his head, swallowing, "It's going nowhere because it would be a bad decision."

"Yeah, dude, I *know*. That's what you keep saying, even though you never tell me *why* it'd be bad." Lucas nods after a beat, dismissive, "Look, all *I'm* saying is, is that it's only a matter of time until someone tries to snag El up."

"Snag?"

"Snag. And then, I guarantee you, ten years from now, I'm gonna find you crying on *my* front doorstep," he lays a hand on Mike's upper arm, grip vice-like as he whispers the rest, "When it's one o'clock in the morning, Reality hits you like a brick, and you're all covered in booze and vomit and shit because you finally realized what you missed out on...and got hammered."

The taller boy pulls a face at the thought, top lip curling into a snarl, "Nice. Really specific."

"I know, man. And listen, I love you, but I'd really rather that didn't happen."

"What do you want me to do? I can't just come out with it, Lucas." Mike twists his car keys in his hand now, finding the clicker. He unlocks the vehicle when they reach it, pulling the backdoor open to toss his backpack inside, "We've been friends since we were kids. Like, little kids. Not just middle school. I've known her for almost as long as I've known you, man. Tell me you wouldn't find it weird if I suddenly told you that I had...feelings. I can't just ruin that because, what, I have a *crush* on her. And, you know what, she probably has zero romantic interest me anyway."

"I don't think it's just a crush anymore, man. You're in way too deep." Lucas wiggles his brows, pulling open the side door with a smile.

"What are you doing?"

Lucas nods his head toward the school where El is, stood with her back pressed to the wall as she talks to Will. He slaps the roof of the vehicle, "Remember, your not-girlfriend needs to *study* ?"

"How are you getting home?" Mike asks, changing the topic.

Lucas' car has been in the shop for over a week now. Ever since El crashed it. Or, dented it, rather.

"Dustin." He says, arms stretching out over his head, "She still owes me thirty bucks for the insurance, you know." He smirks, backing up against the car next to Mike's.

"You're the one who told her she could practice in your car." Mike reminds him, leaning into the car and forcing the keys into the ignition.

"Technically, *I* didn't tell her she could. Max did."

Mike chuckles, "And your parents think..."

"I told them I crashed into this big ass boulder outside the Taco Bell." Lucas informs him, holding his hands apart, "Like, *huge*. So if they ask — and not that they will, but if they do — that's the story we're going with. Tell El, would you?" Lucas asks, fluttering his lashes, "If you can stop gazing into her eyes for all of five seconds and actually *talk* to her like a normal human being."

"I'm not *that* obvious."

His friend just wheezes in response to that, shaking his head from side to side like a little girl with a ponytail swinging, voice raising, "*Oh, El. I love you so much. You're, like, the love of my life. Will you marry me?*"

(Max did the same thing at lunch. The head-shaking thing.)

"Seriously, stop."

"I'm just saying, ask her out already. It doesn't even have to be like an official date. Just the two of you." Lucas clears his throat, and he reaches in through the passenger side door to flip the radio on, tuning into some station that immediately blasts some seventies' track. "Who knows? Maybe she feels the same." He suggests, standing up to face Mike again, "She probably does."

"I doubt it." Mike shakes his head, shoulders dropping as he folds his arms on top of the roof, eyebrows pinched in thought, "She went out with that guy Jake last week."

"Dude, that was a tutoring session because she sucks at algebra," Lucas says, "Just like she sucks at English. And Max was there, too. I'm sure if he tried to make a move, she'd have told you."

"Rubbed it in my face, more like."

"Well, yeah." Running a hand over his head, Lucas sucks in his bottom lip for a moment, considering his words as he pulls his bandana loose. The camouflage material slips from over his head, and he doubles it around his wrist. "Seriously though-"

Mike shoots him a look, "We're done talking about this."

"Alright, fine." Lucas sighs, loudly. Then he straightens, reaching down to pick up his bag from the ground. "Heads up."

Ten seconds later, he's out of sight, disappearing back towards the school in search of Dustin. And El is stood in his place, wide-eyed and perky.

El places a hand on the car door, barely offering Mike so much as a smile before she slips inside the vehicle, tossing her bag down onto the backseat and turning the volume up on the radio. Not even a 'hello' and she's already making herself comfortable.

Mike sighs, moving into the driver's seat. He's used to this.

He pulls off his hoodie and throws it in the back, the sweater landing on top of El's bag beside where Holly is bound to sit.

El finally breaks her silence once they're out of the parking lot. "You know your t-shirt's on inside out, right?"

"What?" Mike shoots her a brief look, trying to keep his eyes on the road.

She leans over in her seat, crossed legs unfolding. "You-" She plucks at the neckline of his tee, yanking on the top of the white cotton to show him the label that's sticking out by the base of his throat. "Somebody got dressed in a hurry." Mike glances down at the material, keeping one eye strained ahead still, "Shit." He sighs, "can you-"

"Yeah," El says, maybe a little too eagerly, a hint of a smile in her voice. She tucks the label under the neck, fingers grazing Mike's skin before she pats his chest just once, keeping her hand there for a moment longer than she needs to. "Loser."

"I guess I wanted to get the hell out of the locker rooms before Troy jumped me again," Mike says, flipping on the indicator just as the light turns red. One left, one right and another left, and he'll be at Holly's school.

"Why would he jump you?" El sits back in her seat, still turned to face him. She pulls one leg up onto the passenger seat, fingers immediately moving to play with the laces of her shoes, adding, "again?"

"I don't know, maybe because I accidentally tripped him up on the field earlier. Cost him the win."

The car in front starts moving then, and El's eyes flicker from Mike's

face to the changing traffic lights. Green. Go. Then she looks back at him, a twinkle in her eye, "Accidentally?"

The corners of Mike's lips tug into a tight grin, "Maybe."

"Boys and their sports."

"Hey, I am not a sports guy! Don't lump me in with those... hooligans."

"Oh, so Lucas is *what* exactly?" El jests, head tilting in thought.

"Lucas plays basketball. Not football." Mike tells her, lips pursing all-knowingly.

"Still a sport's guy." She shrugs, "Just admit it. You think your best friend is a total jock now. He's *such* a lump, right?" She teases, nose wrinkling when Mike reaches out to palm her cheek, then her chin, blindly trying to silence her with a, 'shh,' eliciting a round of giggles from the brunette.

"Mike!"

"El!" He copies, eyes blown wide but staring blankly ahead, middle finger running over her eye, "He could hear you!"

"Stop!" She shrieks, feeling the ball of his hand push against her upper lip, "Oh, my god!"

She pries his hand from off of her face, fingers wrapped around the space between his thumb and forefinger. "Stop! Mike, seriously!" Mike ignores her pleas, wriggling his arm free from her grasp — she totally lets him — and he successfully plasters his hand over her mouth this time, dark eyes never drifting from the road.

"Seriously?" El mumbles into his palm, unknowingly sending goosebumps up his arm as her lips dance along his skin.

When Mike ignores her, she simply reaches forward to finger the volume switch "Fine. Be that way." She sticks her tongue out to leave a thick trail of saliva along his palm, twisting the knob clockwise so the volume cranks all the way up, deafening them to the sound of

some old love song.

"El!" Mike looks over at her for a second, brows furrowed in question. He quickly wipes his hand down the thigh of his jeans before turning the volume down.

El flops back down in her seat, clearly satisfied with herself. "Don't fight me next time."

"I wasn't fighting you," he retorts, voice dipping as he rounds the corner, driving into the small parking lot outside the dance hall Holly will be emerging from any second.

"Fine. Don't *deny* me next time."

(You're undeniable, he thinks to tell her. He doesn't)

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The following morning, he makes it to school early. Well, slightly earlier than usual. He wanted a little extra time to review his trig homework before he handed it in, and there was a mad rush around his house this morning.

Holly was missing an earring — the silver and gold ones she got for her seventh birthday from grandma. His mom had spent the better part of an hour turning the house upside down trying to find it, to no avail. His dad hadn't done much other than sip his coffee and suggest in the most monotone voice, "*Try the sofa cushions, sweetheart*" as he read over the sports section.

Mike ducked out and headed to school before he could be roped into anything.

He didn't grab breakfast, and he got stuck in ten minutes' worth of traffic despite leaving the house earlier than normal. Now his stomach is in knots, twisting and turning and tightening, and Mike feels like he could throw up.

It's strange though because he's skipped his morning meal — the most important one of the day, so they say — before and it has never affected him like this. It's like his insides know of some unspoken anxiety he has but hasn't been made aware of like they're in on some

secret with the universe that Mike doesn't know about.

It's like something bad is about to happen and he knows it, but he's not been afforded the privilege of knowing what it is.

"Don't forget prom is next week!"

There's an obnoxiously yellow flyer shoved into his chest then, and Mike clutches the paper between his hands with a heavy breath.

He's been here five minutes and he's already been winded. Great.

"Don't forget prom-"

Zoning out, he glances down at the small poster. *Flirty fifty and swinging sixties*. Mike rolls his eyes, scrunching the flyer back up in his fist as he continues down the hallway, making for his locker.

Mike feels a wave of goosebumps coat his skin as he reaches his destination, bare arms suddenly freezing despite the favorable temperature and the warmth of the lights lining the school.

One hand moving to clutch his abdomen to still what he assumes is an upset stomach, Mike quickly cracks into his locker. He tosses the crumpled up flyer inside, dropping his backpack to his feet. It lands with a thump.

Mike tugs on the spine of one of the black binders to the right, double-checking its contents before he pulls it out completely. Cradling it in his left arm, he scans the bottom shelf, eyebrows furrowing in curiosity.

(Nothing new here.)

He picks up the single wrapped piece of bubblegum, eyeing it in consideration. Sour apple. Sure, okay.

There's a handful of small torn-off pieces of notepad paper scattered across the shelf, and Mike collects them all in his free hand. Along with a couple of condoms that he places up on the top shelf, unable to hide the small smirk that takes over his face; those were *definitely* from that one guy on the hockey team.



Mike drops the scraps into his left hand then, picking through them at random as he juggles the binder in his arm. It's become a new trend as of late—people leaving him their requests on torn shreds of paper in the hopes he'll accept them.

There are generally just two names written on them: the 'writer' and the recipient. And then Mike has to either hunt down whoever wants something writing or wait for them to come to him.

(Either way, he always gets paid. And sometimes he gets candy or condoms as 'thank you' gifts.)

He knows he has to be quick. Dustin always gets here early, especially when it's the middle of the week, and Mike doesn't want to get caught red-handed.

*To: Gloria Jackson. From: Curtis Taylor.*

*To: Alice Francis. From: Ronald F.*

*To: Stacey Jenkins. From: Fred D.*

*To: Jane Hopper. From: Anonymous.*

*To: Dottie Kyle. From: Troy Pullman.*

*To: Rachel Bateman. From: Dick S.*

Mike scrunches his fist around the notes. He can easily write four letters. He's going to be free all weekend anyway; well, aside from the "Alien" marathon he said he'd do with Wil- Wait.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

He reaches for the names again, opening his hand. The small scraps suddenly stick to his palm, and they all seem to be turned over to their blank side.

Mike feels his stomachache return then, and he drops the binder in a panic, letting the heavy folder drop with a bang to the tiled floor below, the many scraps falling in a flurry of a paper.

He can feel eyes on him as he peers around the hall, crouching down to collect the tiny notes. He grabs at them all with sweaty fingers, nerves seemingly on edge now. There's something *off*, something wrong. His stomach twists, and he has the sudden urge to throw up.

*Rachel Bateman. Alice Francis. Stacey Jenkins. Dottie Kyle. Gloria Jackson.*

And then he reads it, the one name he'd never expected to have to see written on a ripped piece of notebook page like this.

Mike feels his back sliding down the locker before he can stop himself, come to his senses. The cool metal pressing and bruising his spine, and there's a padlock pushing against his lower back. He kicks the binder away from him, long legs stretching out along the floor as his left arm falls slack to his side.

That awful, sinking feeling he'd had in his gut all morning is back—only this time it feels like his stomach has worked its way past his other organs and lodged itself in his throat; blocking his airway and suffocating him, catching his breath to never give back.

His t-shirt is too tight suddenly, and his jeans are irritating his skin, pale legs rubbed raw beneath the denim. His face is on fire, his cheeks flushed several shades of pink and his lips are dry, chapped and parted and blistering. His eyes are burning; tears or maybe even blood threatening to spill—he can't decide.

People are definitely staring at him now, he's sure of it. But he can't find it in himself to care because his heart is clawing at his chest from the inside, thumping against his ribcage and trying to break free for fear of *breaking*.

Mike lets go of all the other notes, keeping just the one between his fingers. He brings it up to eye level, heartbeat thudding in his ears, breath erratic and harsh, other hand running through his hair and pulling, tugging on the strands to *feel*.

He wants to throw up.

*Jane Hopper.*

El.